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The Worst Movies of All Time

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Watching bad movies is often a disconcerting, strange, unsettling experience that raises more questions than provides answers: how did a film so obviously terrible get released? Did the filmmakers responsible recognise the inadequacies of the finished product? Did they even care? It was these questions, among others, that encouraged me to investigate further - as Michael Adams notes, bad movies can be “thought-provoking, if only because you were made to wonder how they’d ever been made” (Adams 2010, p4). Like many other cult film scholars, my initial fandom subsequently motivated my academic studies. In turn, the questions I was interested in also developed: why should we study bad movies – indeed, why should we study the “worst movies of all time”? What can be learned through a serious, scholarly investigation of cinematic badness, of complete and utter failure, of ‘trash’?

In cinema, badness can reveal itself in a myriad of ways. Films may be morally bad, critically disreputable or ‘in bad taste,’ or belong to ‘illegitimate’ genres like pornography. Badness may also be a purely subjective judgment, whereby the film is bad because the viewer simply didn’t like or enjoy it. Consequently, finding an approach that can adequately account for the possible value of all bad movies is particularly challenging. This diversity is also reflected in cult cinema more broadly, a loosely-defined category that comprises a wide variety of films often united more by similarities in reception than any specifically textual characteristics.

I was first introduced to cult cinema through the fan-authored reference guide *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* (Weldon 1983) and was particularly intrigued by the films that seemed to be included among the eclectic selection primarily, if not exclusively, because of their technical ineptitude – a category now generally referred to as badfilm. This is an area of bad cinema marked by incompetence and failure, whereby viewers can recognise, or make claims to recognise, the failed intention to achieve certain standards of cinematic representation. In contrast to films that deliberately eschew the ‘rules’ of cinema – here usually referring to classical continuity style – the unconventional style of badfilms is understood to be the result of a “systematic failure... to obey dominant codes of cinematic representation” (Sconce 1995, p385; emphasis in original). Badfilms are celebrated in cult circles for their naivety, their endearing ineptitude, their overwhelming, unavoidable failure. This is, however, “not a mere summary of critical disapproval but denotes a complete abrogation of the minimal standards of filmmaking” (Hunter in Benshoff 2014, p487). The

badness of badfilms is not “ontologically separable” (p487), and the category of badfilm represents an effort to move away from the subjectivity of taste towards an understanding of “objective badness” (Hoberman 1980). With most badfilms being low-budget, often independently-made, genre pictures, “objective” badness is established through identification of the failed intention to achieve a certain effect, usually as a consequence of the filmmakers’ incompetence and/or inexperience, and exacerbated by a particularly restrictive production context marked by lack of time and money.

Bad movie appreciation can be traced back at least to the Surrealists who, in the 1930s, believed the ‘worst’ movies could reveal a ‘sublime’ moment of truthfulness. Specifically cult appreciation for bad films became visible in the late 1970s with the publication of *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time* (Medved & Medved 1978) and its influential successor, *The Golden Turkey Awards* (Medved & Medved 1980), the latter which first declared Edward D. Wood, Jr., to be the “worst director of all time” and his film *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) the “worst film of all time.” Although not all bad films are cult, and not cult films are bad, badness in its various forms is a significant feature of cult cinema, with badfilms valued for their ineptness and poor cinematic achievement being of “particular interest” (Mathijs & Mendik 2008, p2). Traditionally, at least, cult cinema has positioned itself in opposition to the mainstream. By challenging standards and conventions of taste, style, and quality, badness can be transgressive, with cult fans celebrating “neglected” or otherwise ignored films that “test the limits of contemporary (middle-class) cultural acceptability” (Juno & Vale 1986, p4). Badfilm fans have been described as “cinemasochists” who find “pleasure in cinema others have deemed too painful to endure” (Carter 2011, p102). *Robot Monster* (Tucker 1953), *The Beast of Yucca Flats* (Francis 1961), *The Creeping Terror* (Savage 1964), *Monster A-go Go* (Rebane & Lewis (uncredited) 1965): these films, among others, are a source of “pure enjoyment and delight” (Juno & Vale 1986, p4) for bad movie fans and are frequently described as “so bad they’re good.”

Taken at face value, “so bad it’s good” is paradoxical and problematic. Usually, however, ‘good’ refers to “how humorous something is, as opposed to any other laudable artistic qualities” (McCulloch 2011, p195). In other words, when a film is described as “so bad it’s good” it is generally understood to mean it is so bad it’s a good *experience*, and the greater the evidence of badness, the greater the potential for enjoyment. This has led MacDowell and Zborowski to suggest “so bad it’s pleasurable” as a more appropriate descriptor that makes no claims about the films’ innate quality but does acknowledge its potential as a source of entertainment (2013, p17). Telotte’s suggested phrase, “watchable... terrible” (Telotte 2015) similarly implies a certain level of entertainment

inherent in the films' apparent watchability. Badfilms clearly benefit from an audience who enjoy watching and re-watching them, writing about them, sharing them with like-minded friends, and generally keeping them alive in an increasingly oversaturated media landscape. However, whether a film is described as "so bad it's good," "so bad it's pleasurable," or "watchable... terrible," the underlying assumption is that it *is* pleasurable, entertaining, enjoyable, watchable. This complicates how we understand badfilms as "objectively bad" because having the contextual knowledge to recognise failure – being able to identify the gap between the desired effect and the actual result – does not necessarily mean one will inevitably *enjoy* that failure. Rather, the inherent incoherence and consistent inconsistency that characterises badfilm style means the films are often ambiguous enough to allow for a variety of possible interpretations. In other words, badfilms have value beyond their potential as a source of entertainment and can be used to highlight issues in film studies relevant to those outwith cult circles also.

As Jeffrey Sconce has noted, badfilms can have pedagogical value in part because they "compel even the most complacent viewer into adopting a reading position marked by that rare combination of incredulous amazement and critical detachment" (Sconce in Jancovich et al 2003, p21). He advocates the use of bad movies in undergraduate film studies courses, arguing they offer students an opportunity to examine both the "basic mechanics of film construction" – mise-en-scene, editing, narrative, performance, and so on – and the "political dynamics of representation itself" (p16). Badfilms offer heightened realism through their failure to be believable; rather than encouraging emotional engagement in the narrative, for example, or presenting a coherent, logical film world, they draw attention to the artifice of the filmmaking process instead. *Plan 9 From Outer Space* offers plenty of useful examples of discontinuity that obliterate spatial and temporal coherence. The graveyard scenes combine shots filmed on location during the day with shots filmed on a sound stage set against a pitch-black backdrop, suggesting night. The blatant visual disparities between real and constructed locations render the scene entirely unconvincing: the lack of visual continuity means it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the spatial relations between characters; the poorly constructed, obvious artifice of the sound stage makes any suspension of disbelief particularly challenging. This is before we even begin to consider how character dialogue further complicates any possibility of a coherent understanding of time and space, or how the stilted performances and obvious use of a body double in place of Bela Lugosi, who had died several years prior, further disrupts the scene's credibility. Instead, we are unintentionally invited to look beyond the narrative to the film's construction, to focus on individual elements rather than the whole and to recognise that filmic space and time, rather than emerging seamlessly and organically, is constructed from

disparate parts. This, in turn, allows us to consider conventions of classical film style, such as basic continuity editing, that are more often designed to be invisible and unobtrusive in service of film narrative.

Like Sconce, I am not suggesting replacing 'good' films with bad ones, nor am I arguing that the badness is *actually* good. Indeed, the value of badfilms lies in their failure. Nonetheless, I have found that including examples from bad movies within courses on formalist techniques and textual analysis can stimulate discussion and help students better understand the styles and conventions they largely take for granted in other, 'good' films. In other words, introducing students to badfilms can "better position them to understand, analyse... and [appreciate] *all* forms of cinema" (Sconce in Jancovich et al 2003, pp19-20; emphasis in original). The lack of establishing shots when the vacationing family first arrive at a farmhouse occupied by a polygamous cult in *Manos: The Hands of Fate* (Warren 1966), and the disjointed editing that results in an oddly protracted conversation between the characters, and the unmotivated shifts in angles and perspectives: these can be explained as the result of a fertilizer-salesman-turned-writer-director-star's lack of experience, time and money, but they also unintentionally draw attention to the complex relationship between editing, pacing, and narrative that we likely do not consider when classical continuity is appropriately applied. The film thus encourages us to consider formalist techniques like shot-reverse-shot, establishing shots and, more broadly, how cinematic time and cinematic space are constructed. Another example: the asynchrony of dubbed dialogue in *The Creeping Terror*, allegedly the result of the sound reel being dropped in Lake Tahoe (although this has subsequently been disputed) allows us to consider the co-dependency of sound and image. Whereas in 'good' films these work in service of one another, here we have little choice but to acknowledge the truth – that synchronous sound is an illusion, and the diegesis a construction.

Badfilms also allow us to consider issues of authorship in cinema. Auteurist interpretations often underpin cult reception, and bad movie appreciation is no different. Hoberman even argues the "best" bad movies are "personal, even obsessive works" containing auteurist signatures (Hoberman 1980, p15). Auteurism can help to construct a "romanticised fable" around certain filmmakers (Birchard 1995, p450) who become recognisable cult personalities. Badfilms are often made on the fringes of Hollywood in particularly restrictive working conditions. As a result, a filmmaker may be required to complete various roles, both on- and off-screen. Ed Wood's duties, for example, include writing, directing, editing, producing, and acting, and biographical information is regularly used to inform readings of his films. More recently, *The Room's* (2003) status as contemporary badfilm

classic is indelibly connected to the reputation of its writer-director-producer-star Tommy Wiseau, while the twelve credits Sam Mraovich boasts in queer badfilm *Ben & Arthur* (2002) makes claims of authorship rather persuasive. As a reading strategy, auteurism provides not just a way of valuing the films, but of explaining and, if necessary, even justifying their inept construction. Juno & Vale suggest badness may be a consequence of a “single person’s individual vision and quirky originality” and the “creative solutions” improvised by “individuals *freely expressing their imaginations*” (Juno & Vale 1986, p5; emphasis in original). Auteurist readings, therefore, allow the viewer to identify, or claim to identify, the filmmaker’s sincere determination to make their film *against all odds* and, subsequently, invite us to consider the weight we place on the filmmaker as an apparently distinctive personality and creative visionary across other areas of cinema.

Questions about authorship further invite us to address notions of intention in cinema. Assumptions are frequently made about intention in bad movies, not least of all because “if we cannot assume that a film intended to achieve certain aims, then we cannot deem it ‘bad’ for failing in those aims” (MacDowell & Zboroski 2013, p5). Intentionality is a notoriously complicated, slippery concept – (how) can we ever truly understand the intentions of another person? At the same time, however, our identification of good *and* bad movies regularly involves making assumptions about intentionality. Our evaluation of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ therefore, is inherently tied up in our acceptance that films do not randomly, spontaneously occur but are the result of conscious (i.e., intentional) decisions and deliberate choices made by a person or persons to achieve a certain result. Badfilms draw attention to this through the often extreme disparities between attempt and outcome.

Reflecting on the complex concept of intention thus invites consideration of both how intention is identified and who, or what, is the subject of intention. The voice-over narrator’s claim that a victim was “horribly mangled” moments before the unmarked body is revealed in *Monster A-go Go*. The bizarrely overwrought, philosophical questioning of the self (“I cannot, yet I must! How do you calculate that? At what point on the graph do “must” and “cannot” meet? Yet I must - but I cannot!”) spoken by what is clearly a man in a gorilla suit wearing a poorly constructed astronaut’s helmet in *Robot Monster*. The glaringly obvious visual differences between stock footage of an octopus in a tank and a large, unmoving, rubber octopus in a small pool of water in *Bride of the Monster* (Wood, Jr., 1955). These moments are unsupported by the other filmic elements, unacknowledged within the film itself, and unintentionally, unavoidably, draw attention to themselves. There is no obvious benefit or advantage to be gained through this attention, nothing to suggest we are supposed to notice any discrepancies in style or content. Badfilms often seem to be unaware of their own

deficiencies, asking us to take them seriously despite the sheer visibility and quantity of obvious failure. By acknowledging the assumptions we make about intention in badfilm, we are encouraged to then also consider if and how we make similar assumptions when responding to other forms of cinema.

Furthermore, badfilms invite us to reflect on extratextual information, the context in which a film is made, the knowledge we have at our disposal and the impact that knowledge has on how we respond to the film. Sconce suggests badfilms are a useful pedagogical tool because they carry “none of the critical baggage of a *Citizen Kane* nor the weighty reputation of a Welles, or a Hitchcock, or any other director whose popular persona precedes the consumption of their work” (Sconce in Jancovich et al 2003, p20). In the sixteen or so years since he made this claim, however, significant developments have occurred. It may well be the case that students are unfamiliar with some if not most of the films and filmmakers I have already mentioned, but it requires little time or effort to find out. A quick internet search will immediately flag up the cult reputations of these films and their status as bad movies. While scholars like Umberto Eco discourage looking beyond a text for surrounding information, a more pragmatic approach accepts that any reading of a text will inevitably be influenced by other information at the reader’s disposal (Rorty 1992, p105). Given badfilms’ inherent strangeness, which encourages us to look beyond the text in an attempt to rationalise the irrational object in front of us, we can thus consider the benefits and challenges of using extratextual information to inform our reading. How does knowledge of Wood’s transvestism impact our reading of his feature debut, *Glen or Glenda* (1953), for example? Are we likely to approach badfilms from a position of ironic, critical detachment precisely because we know they are part of the alternative canon? If we were told they were art, would we read them differently? How helpful is extratextual information – does it benefit us by expanding our knowledge, or hinder us by placing expectations upon the film?

Finally, we can reflect on the value of badfilms in their own right – the value of studying cinematic failure. Although bad movie appreciation may take the form of ironic celebration, badness does not need to be transformed into goodness to be legitimised as an area of study. Indeed, attempts to do so often reveal their own incoherence, exposing the difficulties faced when trying to rationalise the irrational (e.g., Craig 2009). Instead, by understanding badness in terms of failed intentions, we can accept the ‘consistent inconsistency’ of badfilm style and judge badness on its own terms. Through this, we can acknowledge that some badfilms contain elements that work as well as ones that do not, without undermining the film’s value as an incompetent text. Our analysis can include

awareness of the many ways badness can manifest, even within a single text, and the various possible ways that badness may be interpreted. Approaching badfilms from a position that foregrounds failed intentions, meanwhile, shifts the core of the debate back on to the text itself and, in doing so, opens up a range of possible avenues for further investigation. Why should we study the “worst movies of all time”? Just as there are many possible responses to witnessing cinematic failure, there are many possible responses to that question including, but by no means limited to: badfilms invite us to address issues we may take for granted, or are concealed, elsewhere in film studies; they offer students an opportunity to expand their understanding of film aesthetics and to reflect on their personal tastes in the process; and they encourage us to consider not only how we identify failure but how that failure functions within the text itself.

[Some of the ideas explored here are discussed in further detail in: Becky Bartlett, “‘It happens by accident’: Failed intentions, incompetence, and sincerity in badfilm,” in J. Sexton & E. Mathijs (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2019), forthcoming.]

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